

Unite refuses to oppose Coventry Labour council strikebreaking against bin workers

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Labour controlled Coventry City Council (CCC) has begun a major strike breaking operation against bin workers at the Whitley depot fighting for a pay increase.

Strikers on the picket line explained the gravity of the situation they face to WSWs reporters.

One said, “Labour are telling utter lies about us. We haven’t had an offer from them. I wouldn’t be surprised to see these turn around and try to privatise it all. If that happens, they will terminate your contract and reemploy you on totally different conditions set out by them. If that happens here they will do it throughout the country.

“We can’t fold here. If we fold here, everyone will be hit: teachers, nurses, carriers who might go on strike, everyone. We have to win this. And if they pick on one guy, they will have answer to every single driver here.”

He added, “Management talk to us like a piece of s**t. In the pandemic we were ‘heroes’, key workers. Now we are zeroes. They treat us like what you find under the sole of your shoe.”

Another driver refuted the claim made initially by the council that they were on an average salary of more than £34,000, with pay ranging up to £52,000. The council rowed back on these more outrageous claims but still maintained that the average salary was £28,000. “I’ve been here over four years and I’ll never get to the top level now before I retire. I’m on £23,000 basic, before tax.”

A driver showed his P60 tax slip showing gross pay of £27,000 and noted that £4,000 of this was contractual overtime, “So it’s not money just given to us, we have to check in early and stay late.”

The 70 refuse truck drivers escalated their strike action from January 31 to five days a week until March, having conducted 10 days of strikes throughout the

month. The Labour authority has rejected demands for a pay rise from the existing £11.49-14.37 an hour to £14-17, depending on seniority.

But while key workers who have provided vital public services throughout the pandemic are denied a living wage, the council is throwing money into its strike-breaking operation.

Scabs hired to drive refuse trucks are receiving wages higher than the pay demand of the strikers. RFE Recruitment has offered an hourly rate of between £18-20 with the agency receiving an estimated additional £7-an-hour cut from each worker.

In addition to bringing in an employment agency to hire scabs, the council is working with Tom White Waste to operate the make-shift service. Eleven waste drop-off points have been set up around the city. This “arms-length commercial investment” is in fact wholly owned by the Labour authority. Over the weekend, the council handed the keys of its depot to Tom White Waste to use its trucks against the strike.

The Labour council has gone further than any Conservative authority in mounting a strike breaking operation against bin workers during the pandemic. Left unanswered this will establish a precedent to be followed against the entire working class.

Yet Unite the union has not lifted a finger to oppose this frontal assault on workers’ rights. With over a million members, it has made no appeal for solidarity action to be taken in defence of the embattled Coventry bin workers.

Unite cannot even call the scabbing by the Labour authority by its right name, describing its actions in its January 31 press release as setting up “a rogue alternative bin collection service.”

From Monday last week, Unite has held extensive talks with the council to avert the escalation of the

strike action, placing emphasis on the promise of a revised pay offer by Friday which the Labour authority summarily reneged on.

General Secretary Sharon Graham complains in a press release of the mixed messaging of the council, which can only be a reference to its backroom manoeuvres with the union. The council's public message from day one has been to attack refuse truck drivers as overpaid. It openly announced its plans for a strike-breaking operation.

Unite has responded by holding out an olive branch, entering talks at the arbitration service ACAS, without even demanding the withdrawal of the strike-breaking plans as a precondition. There has been no coverage of the scabbing operation on Unite's Twitter page or website since it started.

Unite will do nothing that cuts across the corporatist agenda of Graham, a policy she describes as "leverage", involving the union establishing ever closer relations with company boardrooms and investors based on its promise to prevent an expanding strike wave against the employers and the Johnson government over the cost-of-living crisis triggered by inflation rates—now the highest in three decades.

In the Coventry dispute, Unite is presenting itself as the most reliable means of ending the strike on terms deemed acceptable to the employers and preventing it from drawing in other sections of workers.

Unite is telling workers to place their trust in ACAS to make the council agree to a regrading process in which their job description as HGV drivers in all roles will be recognised. As opposed to class struggle, it is advocating various legal procedures over whether the Labour council's actions contravene employment laws and whether the scab company holds the required environmental licenses.

The union has confined the demand for a pay increase to uplifting all refuse truck drivers from a Grade 5 to a Grade 6 on the wage scale, having allowed the council last year to extend the years drivers remain on this lower pay grade from six to 11 years.

Unite has separated the issue of pay from a broader fight against concessions demanded over terms and conditions, including extending the working week from 37 hours (plus 3 hours contractual overtime) to 45 hours and compulsory Christmas working.

It has cordoned off the fight of drivers from other

depot workers such as the carriers (bin collectors). This is under conditions where carriers at the depot have now demanded a meeting to discuss a ballot for strike action under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act, as their safety has been jeopardised by working with untrained drivers and being instructed to collect side waste (bagged but not binned waste).

There could be no clearer proof that the dispute must be taken out of the hands of Unite than its willingness to sit down with strike-breaking organisers.

A rank-and-file committee must be established to end the divisions enforced by Unite between drivers and carriers, who are now part of this fight. In opposition to Unite and other unions in the sector such as the GMB, a unified fightback must be waged against councils of every political stripe who are demanding pay restraint or minor uplifts in return for squeezing out greater levels of exploitation, whether on behalf of the council's programme of cuts or the profits of billionaire private sector companies such as Serco and Veolia.



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